

Cultural Competence: A Critical Aspect of Effective Public Health and Safety Initiatives

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Public health and safety professionals, including health care providers and first responders, regularly interact with individuals from all walks of life. Within this context, being culturally competent is a vital skill for effective program administration and for optimizing the use of program resources. Cultural competence provides professionals with the skills and understanding of the cultural background of specific groups, helping them interact sensitively with individuals from these groups. For example, cultural competence can guide public health and safety professionals when they engage program participants, consider modes of intervention, customize services, adapt practices, and develop policies. By becoming knowledgeable about the cultural affiliations of the populations served by their programs, administrators and staff members can better understand the factors impacting decisions regarding where and how clients access needed services and resources, and what factors may facilitate continued engagement with their programs.

WHAT IS CULTURAL COMPETENCE?

Cultural competence helps to effectively interact, communicate, and work with people from different cultures and backgrounds in an informed and sensitive manner that honors the different cultures and experiences of individuals.

Strategies for Developing and Operating Culturally Competent Programs

The following strategies (adapted from Chin, 2000) can help ensure that public health and safety programs are accessible and effective for all individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds.

- **Invest in cultural competency as an institutional priority.** Program leaders and administrators can help institutionalize practices and priorities that emphasize the importance of cultural competence by establishing strategic goals, policies, procedures, and performance assessments that directly address culturally and linguistically appropriate services. It is also important to intentionally provide avenues for cultural exposure and community engagement (e.g., by collaborating with community-based cultural organizations and diverse stakeholders).
- **Provide ongoing staff training on culturally competent service delivery and communication.** Providing staff members with opportunities for cross-cultural education and/or formal training through cultural sensitivity and competence workshops can help promote awareness of cultural differences and

- biases while also promoting attitudes, behaviors, knowledge, and skills needed for staff members to work respectfully and effectively with program participants and each other in a culturally diverse environment.
- **Hire a diverse staff.** Hiring a varied and culturally representative workforce whose members come from diverse backgrounds can improve trust and communication. Culturally competent programs strive to develop targeted strategies for recruiting, retaining, and promoting qualified, diverse, and culturally competent staff members able to address the needs of the racial/ethnic communities served by the program.
- **Engage feedback from diverse program stakeholders.** Drawing on the expertise of diverse staffs, community members, and participant populations can support public health and safety programs by informing service offerings and delivery. Moreover, program stakeholders' feedback can be helpful when considering whether program policies and practices meet diverse cultural needs. For large-scale program evaluations or in sensitive settings (e.g., law enforcement), it may also be useful to hire external consultants who can assess and advise on such matters.
- **Provide multilingual services.** Whenever feasible, offering program resources, educational pamphlets, intake forms, and important program information in the languages represented in the service community can help remove linguistic barriers to accessing and engaging services. Interpreters and multilingual staff members can be similarly helpful in reducing language barriers; however, it is important that individuals offering translation services not only be skilled in the languages, terms, and concepts relevant to program-related encounters but also trained in the ethics of translation.

There are many benefits to public health and safety providers who prioritize cultural competence:

- ◀ **Build trust among diverse communities.** Cultural competence aids program staff and partners in understanding and respecting the norms and values of diverse communities, building a strong foundation from which to develop positive relationships.
- ◀ **Promote effective communication with individuals from diverse backgrounds.** Cultural competence will help Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Use Program (COSSUP) grantee staff and partners avoid misunderstandings based in culture, enhancing program effectiveness.
- ◀ **Increase program engagement.** Promoting cultural competence will help all individuals feel welcome and valued, increasing program engagement.
- ◀ **Reduce biases and discriminatory practices.** Cultural competence will help provide more equitable treatment for all persons.
- ◀ **Improve problem solving and program administration.** Cultural competence will allow program staff and partners to better understand the needs and challenges experienced by different communities, resulting in more effective problem solving and program administration.
- ◀ **Stay effective and relevant.** Cultural competence will help COSSUP grantee staff adapt to the needs of changing demographics to remain effective and relevant.
- ◀ **Enhance program effectiveness through personalized program experiences.** Culturally competent programs are better able to provide personalized experiences that respect the values, norms, beliefs, and traditions of diverse individuals, thereby enhancing program effectiveness.

- **Develop program materials that are relatable to different communities.** Leveraging culturally inclusive language and content in program materials can refine communications in ways that are more relatable to all populations served by the program.
- **Collect relevant demographic participant information.** Implementing systematic processes for collecting accurate demographic and cultural data, including individuals' primary spoken language and self-identified race/ethnicity, supports efficient program administration. Not only does such information help to proactively make available interpretation services and culturally competent care providers when needed, it also provides a foundation from which to undertake organizational self-assessments that allow program administrators to identify opportunities for improving service delivery to diverse clients.
- **Implement regular cultural competency assessments.** Programs that prioritize cultural competence will benefit from regularly evaluating and documenting their progress with implementing culturally competent standards, including information on service delivery, staffing, and resources, in order to implement a strategic process for identifying areas for improvements.

Diverse cultural beliefs and language barriers can be notable hurdles to the continued engagement of program participants. For this reason, intentionally directing program resources to improve the cultural competence of a program can be considered a foundational step that supports the overall success of public health and safety initiatives. Cultural competence encourages inclusivity and trust building across diverse cultures and helps facilitate personalized care and services that have the potential to produce positive outcomes while also reducing racial/ethnic disparities. The strategies outlined above provide general guidelines for considering and addressing cultural competence at the programmatic level.

For more resources on cultural competence, see the following:

- TIP 59: Improving Cultural Competence (SAMHSA), <https://www.samhsa.gov/resource/ebp/tip-59-improving-cultural-competence>
- Improving Cultural Competence: Quick Guide for Clinicians (SAMHSA), <https://store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/sma16-4931.pdf>
- Think Cultural Health: Office of Minority Health, <https://thinkculturalhealth.hhs.gov/>
- Free online training: Improving Cultural Competency for Behavioral Health Professionals, <https://thinkculturalhealth.hhs.gov/education/behavioral-health>

Reference

Chin, J. L. (2000). "Culturally Competent Health Care." *Public Health Reports* 115(1), 25–33. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1308553/>.

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